

## SYNODALITY AND MINISTRY IN THE EASTERN CHURCHES

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### **Abstract**

Synodality of the Church is an essential manner of her existence. The Eastern Churches maintained synodality without much cessation, remaining faithful to the synodal character of the early Church. The present study focuses on the synodal character of the ministry in the Church, especially in the Eastern Churches. First of all, this study analyses the scriptural foundation of the synodality of the Church, especially seen in the *Acts of the Apostles* (Acts 1:15-26; 6:1-6; 15: 22-35).

The Eastern Churches see the foundation of the synodality of the Church in the Holy Trinity, which is manifested in the gathering together of the congregation for the Eucharist. According to the Eastern Churches, the Roman primacy does not contradict the synodal character of the Church. Even those Churches which are not in full communion with Rome, recognize the primacy of Rome, though not in the exact understanding held by the Catholic Church today. In the East, the bishop exercises his ministry keeping its synodal dimension. The bishop is obliged to keep synodality in his relation with other bishops, priests, deacons and other clerics of his eparchy, and with the religious and lay faithful. The Church of St Thomas Christians has a great testimony of synodality. In the history of St Thomas Christians, we can find the synodality profoundly presented in the various levels of ecclesial life.

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## Introduction

The Church of Christ, from its very inception, was synodal in its existence. The early Church adopted the synodal style because of the firm conviction that Jesus envisaged his Church as brothers and sisters walking together on a journey. There was no question of someone ruling over the other members. The first one in the Church must become the last one. "So Jesus called them and said to them, 'You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all'" (Mk 10:42-44). The authority in the Church is for the service. Christ's Church is synodal, and in that synodal Church all members are equal, each one ready for the service of the other. The synodality of the Church is the essential manner of her existence. Synodality of the Church means the entire people of God 'being on-the-way-together.'<sup>1</sup>

The history of the Church witnessed to the models of authentic ministry in the Church. Various ministries in the Church were indeed manifestations of her synodal character. The synodal character of the ministry ensured the participation in the kenotic service of Jesus Christ. However, in the course of history we find many a time, a thorough distortion of the fundamental concept of the synodality of the Church. Just like any other social institution, the Church also became a system of rulers and ruled ones. The ruled ones were often ignored; they were not consulted in a just manner with regard to the administration of the Church. The ministry in the Church sometimes degenerated into mere exercise of power. The kenotic service, which Jesus envisaged for the members of his Church, became a very rare phenomenon in the Church.

Though the Churches both in the East and West had clear examples of the manifestation of synodality, it is in the East that the Churches maintained synodality without much cessation. All synodal activity in the Eastern Churches is based on the example of the first synod of the apostles in Jerusalem and has developed in that perspective. Hence, this ecclesial tradition presents itself as the continuation and extension of the apostolic tradition.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Annemarie C. Mayer, "'For a Synodal Church': Equipping the Catholic Church on Her Way into the Third Millennium," *Louvain Studies* 43 (2020) 208.

<sup>2</sup>Pallath, *The Synod of Bishops of Catholic Oriental Churches*, Rome: Mar Thoma Yogam, 1994, 43.

Therefore, we may look at the Eastern Churches as models for the synodality of the Church. According to André de Halleux, at a time immediately after the Second Vatican Council, the generally shared opinion of Catholic theologians was the following: the Western Church could find a model for the reforms it envisaged, in the old ecclesiological practice preserved unaltered by the Orthodox Church."<sup>3</sup> Halleux is actually pointing to "a deep reality of Orthodox ecclesial life: communion through synodality."<sup>4</sup>

The present study is an attempt to inquire into the synodal character of the ministry in the Church, especially in the Eastern Churches. Analysing the scriptural foundation and important characteristics of the synodality of the Eastern Churches, we shall examine the various levels of synodality in the Eastern Churches.

### 1. Scriptural Foundation of Synodality

The earliest example of the application of synodality in the life of the Church is already seen in the *Acts of the Apostles*. According to the *Acts*, the twelve Apostles under the leadership of Peter governed the primitive communities of Jerusalem with the help of the presbyters and elders. "The presbyters and elders took part in the responsibilities of the Apostles, though in a subordinate manner. They also participated in the decision-making assemblies, which could be called the 'synodal assemblies' in a large sense, not in the technical sense that is attributed to them today."<sup>5</sup> We can see "the application of the synodal principle in the election of Matthias (Acts 1:15-26), the election of the seven deacons (Acts 6:1-6), and the synod of Jerusalem (Acts 15), underlying the fact that these decisions were taken in agreement with the whole Church or in common."<sup>6</sup>

More important decisions concerning the expansion of the Church in the apostolic period were taken by the assembly of the apostles and elders. Though the term 'synod' was not used at that time, the Jerusalem council is clearly an indication of the collegial life of the Church even from the apostolic period. We also see some kind of a 'synodal letter' to the faithful of Antioch, by which the apostles and elders communicated their decision (Acts 15:22-35). "Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and

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<sup>3</sup>A. Halleux, "Le modèle oriental de la collégialité," *Revue Théologique de Louvain* 2 (1971) 77.

<sup>4</sup>Sorin Selaru, "Expressions of the Church's Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Romanian Orthodox Church," *Louvain Studies* 43 (2020) 261.

<sup>5</sup>Paul Pallath, *Synod of Bishops of Catholic Oriental Churches*, 42.

<sup>6</sup>Pallath, *Synod of Bishops of Catholic Oriental Churches*, 42.

Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsab'bas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren" (Acts 15:22).<sup>7</sup> As Walter Kasper observes, "the mission of the Church is entrusted to the whole of the Church and thus to all Christians together. Nobody is only object; all are also subject in the Church."<sup>8</sup>

We get the most vivid image of the synodality of the early Church in Acts 2:42. Being devoted to the teaching of the Apostles, they participated in the Breaking of the Bread and prayers. It was the participation in the Breaking of the Bread, or the Eucharistic celebration, that actually made them a synodal community.

## 2. Main Characteristics of the Eastern Understanding of Synodality

Even when the Church in the West ignored many of the important aspects of synodality in the ecclesial life, the Churches of the East remained faithful to the synodal character of the Church. The Churches of the East understood the various ministries in the Church as manifestations of its synodality of the Church. The synodal character of the Eastern Churches urged the members to lead a life of service, participating in the kenotic love of Jesus. "Synodality or conciliarity is not merely a means of Church government or an institutional aspect of the Church but belongs to the essence of the Church. The Church has an institutional aspect; but the institution is not the 'cause' of the Church, but the means of her expression and actualization in this world."<sup>9</sup> For the Eastern Churches, because of the synodal dimension of the Church, the entire Church is considered as a great Synod or an ongoing, perpetual synod in which every member's contribution is both individual work and joint work."<sup>10</sup>

### 2.1. Trinitarian Communion as the Foundation of Synodality

The simplified understanding of synodality of the Church as 'journeying together on the way' may become superficial if the essential Trinitarian dimension is lacking in it. The work of the Church does not necessarily become synodal simply because of the fact that it is done by all. Even when all the members of the Church are equal, and all of them are at the same time speakers and hearers, and all are subjects and the objects of the actions in the Church, the Church need not become synodal. The synodality of the Church has an inevitable Trinitarian foundation.

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<sup>7</sup>Pallath, *Synod of Bishops of Catholic Oriental Churches*, 43.

<sup>8</sup>Walter Kasper, *The Catholic Church – Nature, Reality and Mission*, transl., Th. Hoebel, London and New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014, 203.

<sup>9</sup>Pallath, *Synod of Bishops of Catholic Oriental Churches*, 44.

<sup>10</sup>Sorin Selaru, "Expressions of the Church's Synodality," 263.

The Eastern Churches give due importance to the Trinitarian foundation of synodality. Dumitru Staniloae, the famous Romanian Orthodox theologian, views the synodal Church as follows. "Church is the community of those who, by the power of Christ's Spirit, advance towards resurrection and towards the ultimate fulness of perfect communion with Christ and with all those who believe in Him."<sup>11</sup> The synodality of the Church is "simply the way in which we walk along with God and our fellow people on the path to salvation."<sup>12</sup>

According to the Eastern Churches, synodality is modelled on the manner in which the Three Divine Persons experience a communion of divine life, without separation and without confusion. "The Trinitarian model of divine perichoresis is applied in ecclesiology as the various ministries within the Church are submitted to synodality, rather than be placed above it. Any other logic, subordinating synodality to any principle that does not abide by the 'law of communion' is alien to the Eucharistic, Trinitarian *sobornost*."<sup>13</sup>

In the East Syriac perspective, the foundation and criterion of the ecclesial life is the communion (*Shawtaputha*) of the Holy Trinity. *Shawtaputha* is the term parallel to the Greek expression 'perichoresis.'<sup>14</sup> It is the state of the Father indwelling in the Son, and the Son in the Father; it is the state of the Holy Spirit binding together the Father and the Son in communion. Such should the communion in the Church. The state of the believer dwelling in Christ, and Christ dwelling in the believer; the state of the believer reaching communion with the Holy Trinity through communion with Christ; one believer dwelling in other brothers, and the other brothers dwelling in him. This kind of communion is the basic reality of the synodality envisaged by the Eastern Churches. Thus, there has to be the journey in the Church united with Christ and through him united with the Trinity and the fellow beings. The synodality of the Church will be authentic only when the true communion is realized in the model and foundation of the Trinitarian communion.

The Munich common statement of the Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Orthodox Church and the Roman

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<sup>11</sup>Sorin Selaru, "Expressions of the Church's Synodality," 262.

<sup>12</sup>Sorin Selaru, "Expressions of the Church's Synodality," 262.

<sup>13</sup>Sorin Selaru, "Expressions of the Church's Synodality," 264.

<sup>14</sup>For a more elaborate understanding of the concept of *shawtaputha* see K. Luke, "Šawtapûṯâ of the Holy Spirit," *Christian Orient* 5 (1984) 105-121; Pauly Maniyattu, "East Syrian Marriage as Celebration of Shawtaputha or Communion," *Journal of St. Thomas Christians* 30, 2 (2019) 29-42.

Catholic Church declares the necessity of the Trinitarian foundation of the ecclesial life:

That is why the Church finds its model, its origin and its purpose in the mystery of God, one in three persons. Further still, the Eucharist, thus understood in the light of the Trinitarian mystery is the criterion for the functioning of the life of the Church as a whole. The institutional elements should be nothing but a visible reflection of the reality of the mystery.<sup>15</sup>

## 2.2. Synodality Centred on the Eucharist

The primary manifestation of the synodality of the Church is in the gathering for the Eucharistic celebration. "Having its model, its origin and its purpose in the Mystery of the Triune God, church synodality is sacramental or eucharistic. Gathering in the Church in order to celebrate the Eucharist is the primary manifestation of synodality in Orthodoxy."<sup>16</sup> St Paul speaks on the communion realized through the Eucharist. "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (1 Cor 10:17). The Second Vatican Council's decree on ecumenism teaches that the Church is built up and grows in stature through the Eucharist.<sup>17</sup>

The prayers in the Eucharist of various ecclesial traditions clearly speak about the communion realized in the Church through the Eucharistic celebration. The Anaphora of St Basil has the following supplication: "And unite all of us to one another who become partakers of the one Bread and Cup in the communion of the Holy Spirit."<sup>18</sup> The epiclesis of the Qudasha (Anaphora) of Mar Nestorius emphatically speaks on the need for the eucharistic assembly to be united into a single body. "We may all be joined to one another in unity and in one bond of love and peace, that there may be one body and one spirit, as we are called in one hope."<sup>19</sup>

The foundation of the synodality manifested in the ecclesial life has to be the communion of the congregation gathering together for the Eucharist. The authentic ecclesial life is the way on which those who have participated in the body and blood of Christ, and those who were united to God and to the fellow beings, journey together. It is in the

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<sup>15</sup>"The Mystery of the Church and of the Eucharist in the Light of the Mystery of Holy Trinity," Munich 1982, II. I. Cf. Sorin Selaru, "Expressions of the Church's Synodality," 264.

<sup>16</sup>Sorin Selaru, "Expressions of the Church's Synodality," 265.

<sup>17</sup>Vatican Council II, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 15.

<sup>18</sup>Alexander Schmemmann, *The Eucharist: Sacrament of the Kingdom*, New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1988, 234.

<sup>19</sup>Syro-Malabar Commission for Liturgy, *Second Qudasha: The Order of Mar Theodore and Third Qudasha: The Order of Mar Nestorius*, Kakkannad, 2018, 69.

community of the people who lead such a life, that there are no rulers and ruled ones; in such a community all are speakers and at the same time hearers too; in such a community all render service to others and at the same time receive service from others.

### 2.3. Synodality Manifested through the Councils or Synods

Synods or Councils are the occasions expressing the true life-style of the Church. Yves Congar speaks about the significance of synods in relation to the life of the Church. "Councils, and still more conciliarity, are an expression of what the Church is and of the way it lives. *They must be understood in terms of the Church.*"<sup>20</sup> The synodal assemblies manifest the true style of the communion of the Church. Paul Pallath observes that the synod of bishops is the manifestation of the communion of the different local Churches.<sup>21</sup> Ratzinger rightly points out how important it is for the service of a bishop, to be in communion with the bishops. "All bishops are in communion with other bishops: for a bishop is bishop only by being in communion with other bishops, without which he cannot exercise his episcopal office."<sup>22</sup> When a bishop dissents from the general consensus of the Synod, he goes against the Catholic character of his local Church. Any bishop who neglects the unanimous decision of the synod concerning liturgy, negates the synodal character of his episcopal office.

In the history of the Church, the synodality of the Church was manifested in the best way possible through the synods or councils. In the Eastern Churches the synodal character of the Church is manifested in the requirement that at least two times in the year synodal sessions are to be conducted.<sup>23</sup> The smallest synod form in the Orthodox Church is the Parochial Assembly, which passes decisions concerning the local community of faithful, and the largest type of synod is the Ecumenical Council, of the entire Church. According to the Orthodox Church all seven ecumenical councils are extraordinary manifestations of the constitutive synodality of the Church. By exercising synodality, the bishops attending the ecumenical councils defended, confessed and expressed in a living and creative manner the identity of the faith, the unity of the Body of Christ.<sup>24</sup> Starting with the parochial assembly, the smallest form of synod, and culminating in the largest form of the synod, the ecumenical councils, the Church is exercising its synodality at various levels of synods.

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<sup>20</sup>Y. Congar, "The Conciliar Structure or Regime of the Church," *Concilium* 7 (1983) 3.

<sup>21</sup>Pallath, *Synod of Bishops of Catholic Oriental Churches*, 70.

<sup>22</sup>J. Ratzinger, "The Pastoral Implications of Episcopal Collegiality," *Concilium* 1 (1965) 22-23.

<sup>23</sup>Sorin Selaru, "Expressions of the Church's Synodality," 266.

<sup>24</sup>Sorin Selaru, "Expressions of the Church's Synodality," 267.

## 2.4. Synodality in the Communion of the Churches

The principle that the Catholic Church is the communion of various individual Churches, originates from the synodal character of the Church.<sup>25</sup> The synodal character of the Church requires that the Churches approve each other in the communion of Churches. We can find in the history of Church attempts to disrupt this synodal character of the Church. However, there were also examples of defeating such attempts.

The Churches of Asia Minor celebrated Easter and broke fast on 14 Nisan, whether or not it was a Sunday. Even after repeated admonitions from the Pope, those Churches were not willing to change that custom. When Pope Victor decided to excommunicate the Churches of Asia Minor, St Irenaeus, wrote to Pope Victor, dissuading him from excommunicating those Churches. St Irenaeus wrote thus: "Such a diversity of observance has not just arisen now, in our time, but dates from long ago, from our forefathers...they all nevertheless kept the peace, as do we, with one another; the difference in the fast confirms the agreement in faith."<sup>26</sup> St Irenaeus asserted that the different practices in the Churches need not cause disunity, rather they manifest the unity of the Catholic Church.

The true synodal approach is to accept the different Churches and their diverse liturgies and theological positions. The Patriarchal Churches approved and respected each other. In the first millennium the ancient Patriarchal Churches had autonomy in liturgy, discipline and administration. The Second Vatican Council's decree on Oriental Churches points out the relevance and equality of the Individual Churches in the Catholic Communion:

History, tradition and abundant ecclesiastical institutions bear outstanding witness to the great merit owing to the Eastern Churches by the universal Church. The Sacred Council, therefore, not only accords to this ecclesiastical and spiritual heritage the high regard which is its due and rightful praise, but also unhesitatingly looks on it as the heritage of the universal Church. For this reason, it solemnly declares that the Churches of the East, as much as those of the West, have a full right and are in duty bound to rule themselves, each in accordance with its own established disciplines, since all these are praiseworthy by reason of their venerable antiquity, more harmonious with the character of their faithful and more suited to the promotion of the good of souls.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>M. Vellanickal, *Church: Communion of Individual Churches*, Mumbai: 2009, 216-224.

<sup>26</sup>L. Arangassery, *A Handbook on Catholic Eastern Churches*, Changanacherry: HIRS Publications, 1999, 30.

<sup>27</sup>Vatican Council II, *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, 5.



The patriarchs with their synods are the highest authority for all business of the patriarchate, including the right of establishing new eparchies and of nominating bishops of their rite within the territorial bounds of the patriarchate, without prejudice to the inalienable right of the Roman Pontiff to intervene in individual cases.<sup>28</sup>

The Guidelines for preparing the new Code of Canons for the Eastern Churches gave serious consideration to the autonomy of the Individual Churches. The understanding was that there may be only laws related to the discipline concerning all the Church. All other things, except those which are reserved to the Holy See, shall be ordered by the lawful authorities of these Churches through Particular Law.<sup>29</sup> Orthodox theologians regard the Orthodox Church as a communion of sister Churches. They are in accordance with the Trinitarian and Eucharistic model, open to each other, equal and consubstantial, that is, Churches which individually and all together possess catholicity as fullness of the truth of the faith, of life and of sacramental priesthood.<sup>30</sup>

All the Churches in Communion have perfection and integrity.

Just as each Person of the Holy Trinity does not possess only a part of the Godhead, but the full Godhead, or just as every Eucharist contains not only a particle of Christ's Body, but the full Body of Christ, similarly each local Church is not simply a part of the whole Church, but the full manifestation of the Church in a particular place.<sup>31</sup>

#### **2.4.1. Synodality and the Roman Primacy**

The most ancient patriarchates in the Church were the Roman, Antiochene and Alexandrian patriarchates. In the fourth century, Constantinople and in the fifth century, Jerusalem were also counted as patriarchal Churches. The five patriarchates, collectively called the pentarchy, were the first to be recognized by the legislation of the emperor Justinian (reigned 527–565), later confirmed by the Council in Trullo (692). After the Muslim invasions of Egypt and Syria in 638–640, the bishops of Rome and Constantinople were alone in possessing any real power.

Among the patriarchal Churches, the Church of Rome was always given precedence. We can understand from history that the primacy which Peter enjoyed among the Apostles, was also given to the Church of Rome. The theory of pentarchy as held in the first millennium had not in any way excluded the primacy of the pope. The

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<sup>28</sup>Vatican Council II, *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, 9.

<sup>29</sup>*Nuntia* 3 (1976): 21.

<sup>30</sup>Sorin Selaru, "Expressions of the Church's Synodality," 269–270.

<sup>31</sup>Sorin Selaru, "Expressions of the Church's Synodality," 270.

pope was always considered as the head of the patriarchs and defender of orthodoxy with special prerogatives and privileges.”<sup>32</sup> Concerning the position of Peter in the apostolic college J.M.R. Tillard observes that it “is that of a true *primus inter pares*, a *primus* who is genuinely, and not merely in point of honour, first (*primus*), while the *pares* are genuinely equal and do not derive their power or their mission from him. Only the Spirit of God can give these. The first (*protos*) does not absorb the others.”<sup>33</sup>

The primacy of the Bishop of Rome has to be understood in connection with the primacy at the various levels in the Church. The metropolitan was *primus inter pares* in his province, the patriarch in his patriarchate, and the pope was the *primus inter pares* among the five patriarchs, namely in the universal Church.”<sup>34</sup> The primacy of the Bishop of Rome is founded on the Scripture and Tradition of the Church. The witnesses of the Fathers and the prayers of the liturgies of various Churches confirm the primacy of the Bishop of Rome.<sup>35</sup> According to Ratzinger, “the primacy of the bishop of Rome in its original meaning is not opposed to the collegial character of the Church, but is a primacy of communion in the midst of the Church living as community and understanding itself as such.”<sup>36</sup>

Even those Churches of the Byzantine, Alexandrian, Syrian and Armenian traditions, who are not in full communion with Rome, recognize the primacy of Rome, though not in the exact understanding held by the Catholic Church today.<sup>37</sup> However, we cannot say that the Orthodox Churches deny the authentic sense of the Roman primacy. Alexander Schmemmann speaks about the primacy in the Universal Church.

An objective study of the canonical tradition cannot fail to establish beyond any doubt that along with local primacies the Church had also known a universal primacy. The ecclesiological error of Rome lies not in the affirmation of its primacy, but in the identification of this primacy with ‘supreme power,’ which transforms Rome into *principium radix et origo* of the unity of the Church and of the Church herself. However, such error

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<sup>32</sup>W. De Vries, “The College of Patriarchs,” *Concilium* 8 (1965) 40.

<sup>33</sup>J.M.R. Tillard, *Eveque de Rome*, Paris 1982, 150. English translation in Pallath, *Synod of Bishops of Catholic Oriental Churches*, 43.

<sup>34</sup>Pallath, *Synod of Bishops of Catholic Oriental Churches*, 113-114.

<sup>35</sup>Pauly Maniyattu, “Roman Primacy according to the Fathers of the Church and the Ancient Syriac Liturgical Texts,” *Christian Orient* 30.4 (2009) 115-179.

<sup>36</sup>J. Ratzinger, “The Pastoral Implications of Episcopal Collegiality,” *Concilium* 1 (1965) 25.

<sup>37</sup>Pauly Maniyattu, “Roman Primacy according to the Fathers of the Church and the Ancient Syriac Liturgical Texts,” 155.

and alteration of ecclesiological dogma should not lead us to deny purely and simply the fact itself of primacy.<sup>38</sup>

The Eastern Orthodox ecclesiology does not see the supreme authority as monarchic but as synodal.<sup>39</sup>

On the Orthodox understanding of Roman primacy, Paul Pallath has the following observation:

Thus, the Orthodox Churches accept the pope as the elder brother and *primus inter pares* within the episcopal college who presides in love with a universal responsibility and an all embracing pastoral concern, but at present they do not seem to accept a pope who is endowed with universal supreme ordinary jurisdiction, and who is set above the episcopal college with power to confirm or approve even the decisions of ecumenical councils.<sup>40</sup>

The synodal institution is inseparable from the primatial function of the Church and the primatial authority is inseparable from the synod. When we examine the canons of the ecumenical councils, together with the affirmation of synodal structure we see the affirmation of the primatial power on various levels, namely metropolitan on the provincial level, patriarch on the level of diocese or patriarchate, and the bishop of Rome on the universal level.<sup>41</sup> From the Orthodox standpoint, synodality and primacy are complementary and interdependent, only if primacy exists within church synodality, and not the other way around. The relationship between the first among the bishops (the *protos*) and the other bishops in a synod is clearly defined by *apostolic Canon 34*, the 'golden rule' of Orthodox synodality:

It behoves the Bishops of every nation to know the one among them who is the premier or chief, and to recognize him as their head, and to refrain from doing anything superfluous without his advice and approval: but, instead, each of them should do only whatever is necessitated by his own parish and by the territories under him. But let not even such a one do anything without the advice and consent and approval of all. For thus will there be concord, and God will be glorified through the Lord in the Holy Spirit: the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>38</sup>A. Schmemmann, "La notion de primauté dans l'ecclésiologie orthodoxe," in *La primauté de l'Eglise orthodoxe*, Neuchâtel 1960, 141. English translation in Pallath, *Synod of Bishops of Catholic Oriental Churches*, 117.

<sup>39</sup>George Nedungatt, "Synodality in the Eastern Catholic Churches," 66.

<sup>40</sup>Pallath, *Synod of Bishops of Catholic Oriental Churches*, 118. Cf. J. Meyendorff, "Vatican II: A Preliminary Reaction," *St. Vladimir Seminary Quarterly* 9 (1965) 32-33; Evdokimov, "Può avere un senso un servizio di Pietro nella Chiesa? Risposta Russo-ortodossa," *Concilium* 4 (1971) 161-166; A. Schmemmann, "Ecclesiological Notes," *St. Vladimir Seminary Quarterly* 1 (1967) 39.

<sup>41</sup>Pallath, *Synod of Bishops of Catholic Oriental Churches*, 103.

<sup>42</sup>Nicodemos of the Holy Mountain, *The Rudder (Pedalion) of Metaphorical Ship of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church of the Orthodox Christians, Explained by Apapius*

In the Orthodox understanding, the bishops cannot do anything without the *protos*, while the *protos* cannot do anything without the other bishops, either. As Sorin Selaru observes, "his authority as *protos*-bishop is restricted, both with regard to convening the synod (which he cannot do without the agreement of the other bishops), and with regard to the decisions passed by the synod, where his vote carries no more weight than the votes of the other bishops."<sup>43</sup> Thus, authority at the regional level derives from the synodality of bishops, because the *protos*' authority emanates from the synod of bishops having elected him. At the level of the entire Orthodox Church, however, the head/*protos* is not elected by a pan-Orthodox or ecumenical council. Thus, his authority is not derived from the synodality of the bishops, manifesting the communion of Churches, but from the canonical tradition of the Church.<sup>44</sup>

We do not find always in the history of the Church a positive attitude towards the primacy of the Bishop of Rome. At times Bishop of Rome intervened in the autonomy of Eastern Patriarchs. In the first millennium the ancient patriarchal Churches enjoyed autonomy in liturgical, disciplinary, and administrative matters. "As the guarantee of true faith and communion, the Bishop of Rome intervened in the affairs of the Oriental Churches only to safeguard the true faith and morals or to restore peace and harmony in case of serious canonical disorder or to give his decision when appeals are made to Rome."<sup>45</sup> But the Roman centralization had disastrous impact on the relation with the Eastern Churches. The power of the Patriarchs was considered a participation in the power of the Bishop of Rome.

Clarence Gallagher speaks on the Roman centralization which happened even after the promulgation of the legislation of '*Cleri sanctitati*':

The legislation of '*Cleri Sanctitati*' was seen as a clear reflection of the tight Roman centralization that had developed over centuries within the Latin Church and was now being forced upon all the Eastern Churches in union with Rome. The very structure of the *motu proprio* was taken as a clear indication of this Roman centralization: the canons concerning the patriarch -the *protos*- come only after the legislation concerning the Roman Cardinals, the Roman curia and the legates of the Roman Pontiff.<sup>46</sup>

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and Nicodemos, trans., D. Cummings, Chicago, IL: Orthodox Christian Educational Society, 1957, 50. Cf. Sorin Selaru, "Expressions of the Church's Synodality," 270.

<sup>43</sup>Sorin Selaru, "Expressions of the Church's Synodality," 271.

<sup>44</sup>Sorin Selaru, "Expressions of the Church's Synodality," 271.

<sup>45</sup>Pallath, *Synod of Bishops of Catholic Oriental Churches*, 59.

<sup>46</sup>C. Gallagher, "The Concept of 'Protos' in the Eastern Catholic Churches," *Kanon* 9 (1989) 101.

According to George Nedungatt,

the number of times that even a patriarchal church has to refer matters to Rome or get the papal assent is too high to be compatible with the autonomy that is its prerogative. For example, the patriarch may not transfer the patriarchal see even with the unanimous vote of the episcopal synod - it is not enough to inform the pope before or after, but his prior consent is needed (CCEO c.57§3).<sup>47</sup>

The pope can suppress a patriarchal church even without consulting anyone.<sup>48</sup>

Paul Pallath, commenting on the decree *Orientalium Ecclesiarum* observes,

Putting an end to centralization, the decree concentrated on the principle of the disciplinary autonomy of every Oriental Church. Every one of the *sui iuris* Churches should be encouraged to develop according to its own tradition and spirit. Each Church is governed by its own organisms. Thus, a *sui iuris* Church in its hierarchical constitution, regime and discipline does not depend upon any other *sui iuris* Church regardless of size or historical derivation. Each *sui iuris* Church can decode its own destiny under the guidance of the Roman Pontiff, a practice which helps the restoration of authentic Oriental tradition.<sup>49</sup>

Nedungatt observes that the new Eastern Code has contributed positively to the revival of the synodal structure of the Eastern Churches,

No doubt, compared to the former legislation, the new code CCEO grants to the Eastern Catholic Churches greater autonomy. This would be called decentralization in the West. From an oriental standpoint it is the recovery of the ancient synodal structure of church government, which was absorbed in the West by the extension of the Roman primacy. This recovery, paradoxically enough, is due to the concern for tradition among the oriental churches and not so much to any modern democratic ferment.<sup>50</sup>

### 3. Synodality of the Patriarch

The patriarch of an Eastern Catholic Church does not have the fullness of power in his Church. Broadly speaking, according to CCEO, of the three powers – legislative, executive and judicial - he has only one, namely the second. He can exercise this power in several cases only after getting the consent or advice of a synod and /or of the Roman See. There is a decrease of the patriarchal powers in CCEO in

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<sup>47</sup>George Nedungatt, "Synodality in the Eastern Catholic Churches," *Concilium* (1992.5) 78.

<sup>48</sup>Canon 57 § 1 of CCEO.

<sup>49</sup>Paul Pallath, *Synod of Bishops of Catholic Oriental Churches*, 61. Cf. G.D. Gallaro, "Orientalium Ecclesiarum Deserves More Attention," *Nicolaus* 2 (1986) 299.

<sup>50</sup>Nedungatt, "Synodality in the Eastern Catholic Churches," 78.

favour of the synods. Nedungatt considers this a move in the direction of democracy.<sup>51</sup> There was a time when the Eastern patriarchs enjoyed greater power. In the Middle Ages in certain Eastern Churches, powers got concentrated in the patriarch, who was the ecclesiastical and civil head of a minority Christian community living mostly in a hostile milieu.

In CCEO the principle of subsidiarity has been applied to a great extent at the patriarchal level, but not much at the eparchial or parochial levels, and only somewhat at the primatial level. "The patriarch needs the consent of the permanent synod for certain administrative acts like convoking the episcopal synod (c. 106 § 2) or accepting the resignation of a bishop (c. 210 § 3). So too, he must ask its counsel to give an authentic interpretation that will be valid till the next episcopal synod (c. 112 § 2), which may then confirm or revoke it. The patriarch needs the consent of the permanent synod in about twenty-five cases in all and its counsel or advice in about fifteen others."<sup>52</sup>

Concerning the power of the patriarch of Constantinople John Meyendorff says:

It was inevitable, however, that major doctrinal issues were solved in Constantinople by the patriarch and the bishops who, around him, constituted a permanent synod. More representative assemblies, sometimes presided over by the emperor and including the other Eastern patriarchs or their delegates, met on exceptional occasions to solve the more important issues.<sup>53</sup>

"The participation of the lay faithful in the synods and in the election of the patriarch shows the application of the synodality in the Eastern traditions. In the Russian Church four laymen have been members of the patriarchal synod and in charge of financial and other such administrative matters."<sup>54</sup> The laity have a part in the election of the patriarch in the Coptic Church, in the Serbian Church and in the Bulgarian Church. In the Bulgarian Church, the lay people share in the legislative power of the cleric-lay assembly as well.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>51</sup>Nedungatt, "Synodality in the Eastern Catholic Churches," 68.

<sup>52</sup>Nedungatt, "Synodality in the Eastern Catholic Churches," 71.

<sup>53</sup>John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes*, New York: Fordham University Press, 1974, 87.

<sup>54</sup> *Kanon III*, 1977: *The Position of the Laity in the Law of the Oriental Churches*, 37. Cited in George Nedungatt, "Synodality in the Eastern Catholic Churches," 80, foot note 21.

<sup>55</sup> *Kanon III*, 1977: *The Position of the Laity in the Law of the Oriental Churches*, 37. Cited in George Nedungatt, "Synodality in the Eastern Catholic Churches," 80, foot note 21.

In the East Syrian Church the Synod of Mar Joseph in 554 observes a situation when the Patriarch goes against the synodality and enunciates clear principle of synodality in his judgements:

Again it was reported that some who are entrusted with the rank of the great fatherhood, which is the patriarchate, do things by themselves, for themselves, and within themselves, and they go about and make determinations, and though they do not appear to the bishops or call them before them, they require them to make ratifications by force. If they do not ratify, they stir up accusations against them, and anathematize them, and dismiss them from the episcopacy. Also, for this reason, we decree that any metropolitan or patriarch should do whatever he does with the advice of the community and when there are many bishops. A trial is validated in this way and whatever he does is trustworthy. But if there is a matter which is pressing, and there is no opportunity afforded to gather the bishops, or the haste of the matter does not allow for an extension of time – for if it is deferred until the bishops come there will be harm – because of this, out of necessity, nothing can be done by less than three bishops, for the council of the community designates three bishops, according to the word of our Lord, who said. ‘Where two or three shall be gathered in my name, I will be there among them.’ Whoever ventures to do otherwise is liable to the judgement and to the retribution which is approved by the community.<sup>56</sup>

#### 4. Synodality of the Bishops

Bishop, the head of the local Church, exercises his ministry keeping the synodal dimension. Both in the East and West, the archdeacon and corepiscopa shared in the administrative power of the bishop. The Archdeacon’s role was prominent also in the Latin tradition. The ministry of archdeacon and corepiscopa contributed to the synodal functioning of the ministry of the bishop. The Bishop while exercising his ministry is obliged to keep synodality in his relation with other bishops, priests, deacons and other clerics of his eparchy, and with the religious and lay faithful.

The history of the Church bears witness to the fact that the bishops administered their dioceses collegially. The apostles, the fathers of the Church and their successors acted collegially as the various provincial, regional, and ecumenical synods of the first millennium give evidence. “The Second Vatican Council clearly states that the bishops acted collegially from very ancient times and points out some examples of collegial action, such as the holding of different kinds of councils, plurality of bishops in episcopal consecration (LG

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<sup>56</sup> Canon 7. J.B. Chabot, *Synodicon Orientale*, Paris: 1902, 358-359. English translation by M.J. Birnie: The Eastern Synods from the Collection of the ‘Nestorian’ Synods: ‘The Holy Apostolic Catholic Church of the East’ (Assyrians), San Jose, California: 1991.

22a) etc.”<sup>57</sup> The fourth canon of Nicaea clearly recognized and officially approved the synodal structure of the Church. According to the canon, the appointment and consecration of a bishop is the collegial or synodal action of all the bishops of the province. If all bishops of the province cannot be present because of some pressing necessity, at least three can come together and perform the election, but the written consent of the absent bishops is necessary.<sup>58</sup>

From the Orthodox standpoint regarding the various ministries in the Church, the pastoral-sanctifying ministry distinguishes episcopal synodality from general synodality, or the catholicity of the Church, but always considers them to be complementary, as the former is simply the organic reflection of the latter. Episcopal synodality expresses both the principle of communion, and the transcendent origin of the sanctifying acts in the Church.<sup>59</sup> The unity and communion of the local Churches is manifested through the synodality of the bishop. According to Sorin Selaru, “from the Orthodox standpoint, the synodality of the episcopacy manifests the unity and communion of local Churches, because the bishop present in a synod embodies, or stands for, or represents his local Church, as an expression of the solidarity of all members in the One Body of Christ”.<sup>60</sup> The episcopal synodality is an indispensable prerequisite for Church *sobornost*, because through it, ‘the catholicity of the local Church is guaranteed and protected.’<sup>61</sup>

## 5. Synodality in the St Thomas Christian Tradition

The Church of St Thomas Christians has a great testimony of synodality. ‘Mar Thoma Margam’, the very name given to the sum total of the ecclesial existence of St Thomas Christians, points to the synodal character of this ecclesial tradition. In the history of St Thomas Christians, we can find the synodality profoundly presented in the various levels of ecclesial life.

The synodality of the bishop was realized to a great extent through the ministry of archdeacon and corepiscopa, who were priests having received the extra orders of archdeacon and corepiscopa. The bishops

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<sup>57</sup>Cf. J. Hajjar, “La collegialità episcopale nella tradizione orientale,” in G. Barauna, *La Chiesa del Vaticano II*, Firenze 1965, 810-831; P. Gouyon, “Collegiality in the Early Church Tradition,” in Y. Congar, H. Küng & D. O’Hanlon, eds, *Council Speeches of Vatican II*, London-New York: 1976, 39-41. Cf. Paul Pallath, *Synod of Bishops of Catholic Oriental Churches*, 62.

<sup>58</sup>Paul Pallath, *Synod of Bishops of Catholic Oriental Churches*, 88.

<sup>59</sup>Sorin Selaru, “Expressions of the Church’s Synodality,” 268.

<sup>60</sup>Sorin Selaru, “Expressions of the Church’s Synodality,” 269.

<sup>61</sup>Sorin Selaru, “Expressions of the Church’s Synodality,” 268-269.



of St Thomas Christians had both spiritual and temporal powers which were effectively exercised by the indigenous archdeacons. The whole jurisdiction was practically in the hands of the Aarchdeacons.<sup>62</sup> The archdeacon of St Thomas Christians was known as the archdeacon of All India. In the St Thomas Christian tradition the archdeacon was called *jathikku kartthavyan*, the administrator of the community. In the administration of the Church, the archdeacon was helped by the *Pothu Yogam*, the General Assembly of the Church.

The East Syrian Synod of Seleucia-Ctesiphon (410 AD) determined that every bishop must have an archdeacon, who is eloquent, learned, solicitous about the poor and strangers, one who knows how to arrange things for the ecclesiastical ministry. The synod qualifies the archdeacon as the hand, tongue, and glory of the bishop, a torch before the bishop and the whole Church.<sup>63</sup>

There was also corepiscopa, to assist the bishop, doing some of the ministries of the bishop in the village areas. Canon 29 of the Synod of Seleucia-Ctesiphon prescribes the place of honour for the archdeacon and corepiscopa. In the Church they sit next to the bishop. When they accompany the bishop, the archdeacon walks on the right side of the bishop and the corepiscopa on the left.<sup>64</sup>

Another important element that contributed to the synodality of St. Thomas Christians was the *Yogam* (assembly). There were *yogams* at various levels like *Pothu Yogam* (General Assembly), *Pradesika Yogam* (Regional Assembly), and *Palli Yogam* (Parish Assembly). “Yogam is roughly an indigenous institution combining the pastoral council and the eparchial convocation, but both at the eparchial and at the parish levels the laity share in decision-making not only in the administration of temporal goods but in the selection of the clergy, in enjoining penal sanctions for violations of discipline, etc.”<sup>65</sup>

Yogams were the most efficient means for facilitating the better participation of lay faithful in the administration of the Church. “The General Yogam was the assembly of the priests and representatives of the Christian faithful of all the parishes of the Church of St. Thomas Christians, convoked and presided over by the Archdeacon of All

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<sup>62</sup>Jacob Kollaparambil, *The Archdeacon of All-India: A Historico-Juridical Study*, Rome: 1972, 83.

<sup>63</sup>Canon 15 of the Synod of Seleucia-Ctesiphon (410) cited in Jacob Kollaparambil, *The Archdeacon of All-India*, 59.

<sup>64</sup>Canon 29 of the Synod of Seleucia-Ctesiphon (410) cited in Jacob Kollaparambil, *The Archdeacon of All-India*, 63.

<sup>65</sup>*Nuntia III*, pp.160-161. Cited in George Nedungatt, “Synodality in the Eastern Catholic Churches,” 80, foot note 22.

India. Matters pertaining to the whole community were not decided by the Metropolitan nor by the archdeacon, but only by the General Assembly."<sup>66</sup> The Regional Assemblies consisting of priests and lay representatives from at least four parishes had judicial power. The parish assembly known as the *Palli Yogam* consisted of the priests and heads of the families of the parish. The *desakkuri* (certificate) given by the Palli Yogam was required for ordaining to priesthood any person from the parish.

## Conclusion

The synodal character is something which pertains to the very essence of the Church. The synodality was almost synonymous with ecclesial life in the Scripture, in the early Church and also in the Church of the first millennium. In the course of history, the Church in the Latin West slowly slipped away from its synodal character. But the Churches of the East remained faithful to their synodality, in spite of all the temptations to follow the suite of the West. As George Nedungatt has rightly observed, in the East, synodality has achieved a synthesis of the monarchic and the democratic principles in an equilibrium that avoids the defects and weaknesses both have in their extremes or isolation. In this sense, Eastern synodality is a happy church marriage between monarchy and democracy.<sup>67</sup>

It is an urgent time for the Church to rediscover its synodal character. The Eastern Churches should inspire the Church in the West to strive hard to regain the lost synodality. However, the Eastern Catholic Churches who have lost their ecclesial identity, due to various historical reasons, may have to struggle much to re-capture the glorious state of the synodality from the past. Only such a re-capturing of the synodality can ensure the restoration and renewal of the identity of the Eastern Catholic Churches.

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<sup>66</sup>Paul Pallath, *The Catholic Church in India*, Kottayam: OIRSI, 2010, 29.

<sup>67</sup>George Nedungatt, "Synodality in the Eastern Catholic Churches," 65.